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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 LILONGWE 000820

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR AF/PDPA, AF/S

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TAGS: [KPAO](#) [KDEM](#) [MI](#)

SUBJECT: MEDIA REPORT: STATE-RUN MEDIA FREEDOM
INCREASING, POLITICAL INTERFERENCE DECLINING

REF: A. LILONGWE 400

[1](#)B. LILONGWE 403

[1](#)1. SUMMARY: A new era is dawning for the state media in Malawi. The Malawi Broadcasting Corporation (MBC) and Television Malawi (TVM) have increased their coverage of different political perspectives after newly-elected government officials openly encouraged the two media houses to present opposition views. END SUMMARY.

[1](#)2. Information minister Ken Lipenga, a seasoned journalist and former editor-in-chief of two independent daily newspapers, visited MBC and TVM offices on July 21 and assured journalists that no one would lose their job for interviewing members of the opposition.

[1](#)3. The two media houses immediately acted upon Lipenga's instructions. Opposition leaders are being allowed to comment critically on government policies and other political developments. MBC's daily Press Review program has for the first time included both pro- and anti- government stories. MBC has now started broadcasting a live phone in program allowing listeners to participate in political debates.

[1](#)4. President Bingu Wa Mutharika and his administration are decreasing their use of state-run media for United Democratic Front (UDF) purposes. His first political rally as President, held a month after he took office, was by his own directive not broadcast live on MBC. Explaining why the President rejected live coverage, Lipenga said the President felt the rally did not warrant such coverage because it was merely a political party function. Mutharika's directive received praise from surprised political analysts who described it as a marked departure from the 'destructive politics' of his predecessor, Bakili Muluzi, who was notorious for his monopolization of state media resources.

BACKGROUND

[1](#)5. Since the UDF came to power in 1994, the two public broadcasting services have come under fire for favoring the ruling party. MBC's bias was most evident in the run-up to the May 20 general elections when it completely closed the airwaves to the opposition (reftels); international election observers unanimously cited this bias as a limiting factor in the overall fairness of the elections. Calls by civil society groups and other stakeholders for the two public broadcasters to level the playing field were unsuccessful and yielded little politically-balanced coverage.

[1](#)6. The Malawi Communications Regulatory Authority (MACRA) did very little to encourage balanced news at MBC and TVM. The two state-run institutions are not MACRA license holders and thus the regulatory body has very little authority over their broadcasting and operations. MBC began broadcasting in 1964 as the only radio station in the country, and Television Malawi was established in 1996. MACRA was formed in 1998, and until MACRA's existence the two media houses were answerable only to the Ministry of Information. Any media organization established after 1999 is required to obtain a MACRA license; however, TVM and MBC have not been required to do so, thus MACRA's authority has been limited. MACRA has on several occasions threatened to withdraw broadcasting licenses from the Malawi Institute of Journalism Radio, Capital Radio and Radio

Maria (Owned by Catholic Missionaries) on allegations that the three private radio stations air unbalanced news.

17. In principle, the ruling party has claimed to be a champion of press freedoms throughout its ten years in power. During the same period the Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA) awarded Malawi the dubious honor of being ranked second only to Zimbabwe in the Southern African sub-region for the most number of reported media abuse incidents. Media oppression in this period included the closing down of private radio stations, arrests of private-media employees, political abuse of state media, and violence against journalists by the UDF's notorious youth wing, the "Young Democrats". Journalists at MBC were fired for allegedly holding pro-opposition political views; many of these journalists have filed court cases against the GOM.

COMMENT

18. Over the past two months, TVM and MBC have begun to show increasing signs of the ability to work free from political party influence and interference. Opposition views are being aired even when directly critical of the President. The ruling party now must pay for dedicated coverage of party events, and the offer is open for other parties to do the same. This progress is a good sign, but the ruling party's tolerance for the presentation of dissenting views is uncharted territory and equal access is by no means guaranteed.

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